

INTRODUCTION

“Links in a Long Chain”

Jews, Judaism, Health, and Hygiene

In December 1883, James E. Reeves, the Secretary of the State Board of Health of West Virginia, delivered a speech to the annual meeting of the American Public Health Association. The speech was later printed in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, the nation’s most prestigious medical journal. Reeves spoke about the “usefulness of state boards of health in guarding the public welfare” and the intimate link between laws of health, the fitness of the individual citizen, and the “prosperity, freedom, and glory of the State.” He began by noting that

the principles of sanitary science are not of modern origin. Indeed, they are as old as the Mosaic code, and their unerring rewards and penalties have marked the life-history of all the nations that have covered the earth. In their scope, they are wide enough to embrace all humanity, and just as applicable to communities of to-day as they were to the Jewish race thousands of years ago.¹

Forty-five years later, in the Hebrew language journal *The Hebrew Physician (Ha-Ropheh ha-Ivri)*, Dr. Yosef Tennovim gave voice to the same basic idea, though more forcefully and with greater specificity: “Almost all contemporary medical issues or questions found expression already in ancient Hebrew medicine. Concerning the modern understanding of the circulation of the blood, there are already hints of this understanding in the Talmud, testifying to a specific professional erudition [*b’kiyut*] long before [William] Harvey. . . .” For almost all the modern insights into psychology and medicine, including hygiene, “one can find support, a trace, evidence in our ancient medical writings.”²

Both Reeves and Tennovim were participating in and contributing to a particular interpretive tradition about Moses, medicine, and the history of Judaism and the Jews. *The Healthy Jew* explores this interpretive tradition.³ In continental Europe, Great Britain, and the United States of America, physicians, medical researchers, and popular writers rendered Moses and the rabbis of the Talmud as medical authorities, equal or superior in their knowledge to both ancient and modern scientific figures. Jewish law and ritual, in turn, were translated into codes of health and hygiene, and presented as equal or superior to ancient and especially to modern systems of medical knowledge. Thus, Moses was the ancient equivalent of Joseph Lister, Louis Pasteur, and Robert Koch. The Jewish dietary laws, sexual hygiene laws, the practice of circumcision, and the myriad rules dealing with purity and impurity found in the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud were ultimately not religious but medical in nature. And this abiding concern with purity and health had its effects, largely positive, on the Jews themselves, ensuring their survival and vitality. This interpretive tradition found expression in texts produced in German, French, Italian, English, and Hebrew (at the least),⁴ which appeared in mainstream medical journals, academic monographs, newspapers, and popular magazines and journals, both general and Jewish. This book explores these texts in the light of a number of broader trends in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, debates over civilization and culture, orientalism, religion and science (in the wake of Darwin), anti-Semitism and Jewish apologetics, and the scientific and medical discoveries and debates that revolutionized the fields of bacteriology, preventive medicine, and genetics/eugenics.

The role played by physicians, anthropologists, and racial hygienists in the identification of the Jews with disease has occupied a prominent place in recent studies of modern Jewish history, the history of anti-Semitism, and Nazism. Such works have, furthermore, emphasized the fundamental importance of medicine and biology in preparing the ground for the Nazi extermination.⁵ Moreover, as Sander Gilman and others have pointed out, many Jews themselves came to accept this image of the diseased Jewish body and soul, and set about seeking to reform or regenerate Jewry.⁶ The large body of scholarship that explores the nexus of Jews, disease, the natural and social sciences, and the politics of “the Jewish

body" is, of course, extremely important. But a substantial literature that linked Judaism and Jewry with health and hygiene was also produced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This scientific and popular work was published throughout Europe and the United States, the labor of non-Jews as well as Jews. Thus, the "disease" or "health" of Jewry remained an open question, for both Jews and Christians (as did the even larger question about the very identity of "the Jews"), and a variety of opinions competed for intellectual hegemony in the decades prior to the 1930s (and, indeed, beyond).

Most of the recent scholarship on this question has been concerned with the "diseased Jewish body" as constructed by both Gentile and Jewish elites. My focus in this book is the flip-side, the medicalization of Jews and Judaism that rendered a hygienic Judaism and a healthy Jew. I don't question the medicalization of Jews and Judaism as an important development over the past two centuries, though we may be in danger of overemphasizing the extent of its import. Rather, my interest is in redressing what I see as an imbalance in the scholarship that has produced a one-sided notion of this medicalization. This study recovers the healthy Jew and the interpretive tradition that situated Judaism at the center or forefront of Western medicine and civilization.

JUDAISM AND HEALTH

The debate that began in the eighteenth century over the emancipation and integration of the Jews into the modern nation-state was infused with the language of medicine and science. The historical reconstruction of "the Jewish Question," as the debate over Jewish integration came to be called, tends to focus on the negative representation of Jews and Judaism. For even the most sympathetic advocates of Jewish legal and civic equality, individuals such as Christian Wilhelm von Dohm in Germany and the Abbé Grégoire in France, conceded that the Jews were degenerate and diseased – even if such terms were used as much in the moral as in the physical sense.⁷ Judaism was inferior, the cause, together with Christian oppression and persecution, of the contemporary degeneracy of the Jews. Emancipation and integration would, so it was argued, free the Jews of the negative influences of both rabbinism and Christian

oppression. The transcendence of both traditional religion and historical experience would produce a healthy Jew. This was a view held by Gentile advocates of Jewish emancipation and also by a significant proportion of Jewish elites who entered into these debates.

The interpretive tradition I analyze in this book is different in significant ways from the emancipatory discourse that emerged in the late eighteenth century around the question of Jewish civic rights and the place of the Jews in the newly emerging nation-state. The story of Moses and hygiene that grows in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is, I argue, a repudiation, at least implicitly, of the idea that the Jews and Judaism are degenerate and that they require Europe to civilize *them*. As we shall see, the thrust of the discourse explored here is that the Jews were civilized thousands of years ago; *they* helped to civilize Europe; and they could be of assistance again if Christians would only follow the Jewish model of preventive medicine. While the anti-Semitic image of “the dirty Jew” is well known, it is not so well known that an alternative set of images circulated of a clean and healthy Jewry, living amidst the dirt and disease of European Christendom.

Moreover, the interpretive tradition of Moses and hygiene was a response to, and a transcendence of, the Enlightenment’s thinking about Egypt and Israel, Europe and the Jews, “civilization” and Judaism. The Enlightenment repudiated what Jan Assmann has called the “Mosaic distinction,” the notion that “Israel embodies truth, Egypt symbolizes darkness and error. Egypt loses its historical reality and is turned into an inverted image of Israel. Israel is the negation of Egypt, and Egypt stands for all that Israel has overcome.” One of the central components of the Enlightenment’s arsenal, Assmann argues, was the “deconstructive memory” that challenged this Mosaic distinction.⁸

If, as is well known, the primary target for Voltaire and others was the Church, Jews and Judaism were nonetheless objects of ridicule and hostility. But “the Enlightenment,” of course, was hardly a monolithic movement, and the ideas and opinions generated by philosophers and publicists about Jewry were varied and complex. Enlightenment thinkers were profoundly ambivalent about Judaism and Jews.⁹ Though Jewish history and religion could not be tolerated, a philosophy rooted in notions of universal tolerance could not articulate a principled intolerance of Jews. *Philosophes* used Judaism to articulate key ideas, but they could

never either fully repudiate Jews and Judaism, or integrate them into their own visions of an ideal society. What is relevant here is the emergence within Enlightenment thought of an “originary” Judaism,¹⁰ a Judaism believed to be equivalent to natural religion that had not been corrupted by priests and useless ceremonies. This originary Judaism was contrasted with papal Christianity, and also with rabbinic and contemporary Judaism. As Adam Sutcliffe has persuasively demonstrated, thinkers such as John Toland and Voltaire, among others, posited an ancient purified “Judaism” that was later negated by degenerate Jews and Judaism. Moses, in this view, was an Egyptian, and all true wisdom derived from Egypt and Chaldea. The purity laws and other barbaric superstitions (like circumcision) associated with Moses were in fact introduced by the cultic priests, and were the surest sign of Jewish degeneracy.¹¹ This held true as well for many *Maskilim* or Jewish enlighteners, who believed that Jewish religious rituals and customs were in large measure responsible for whatever physical and mental ills plagued their co-religionists. As John Efron has argued with regard to the eighteenth-century Jewish physician, “there existed a certain strain in *Haskalah* thinking that held that Jews had ceded control of their bodies to nothing less than Judaism itself.”¹²

The narrative of “the healthy Jew” challenged this older Enlightenment view of Moses, Jewish ritual and law, and the status of the Jews. It repudiated the notion of an originary Judaism distant and distinct from the Mosaic laws and the later rabbinic tradition. In the texts I explore here, rabbinic and medieval Judaism are natural extensions of the healthy, positive laws and ceremonies that originate with Moses. If in the eighteenth century and beyond a chasm was posited by some between an idealized and purified Judaism that had existed before the priests and rabbis, and contemporary Jews and their institutions, others sought to close that gap in the nineteenth century. And that gap was closed, as we shall see, by Christians as well as by Jews. These physicians and medical writers did not seem to accept the Enlightenment (and *Maskilik*) rendering of Judaism and the Jews. Religion, in the guise of Jewish law, was not something that needed to be transcended if Jews – or Christians for that matter – were to be healthy, either individually or as a collective. Yet “religion” did require translation, a reinterpretation in terms of public hygiene and preventive medicine. Nor did the historical experience of the

Jews under Christian rule necessarily result in debility and degeneration: rendered through the prism of Darwinism, the historical experience of isolation and oppression, suffering, violence and death could be seen to act as a natural selection process, removing the weak and leaving a stronger, more vital Jewish people. What I hope to bring into stronger focus here is a discursive tradition that developed among Christians and Jews that shared important components of other discursive traditions (i.e., Enlightenment and *Maskilik*, anti-Semitic and anti-modern) but was nonetheless distinct and, in important ways, oppositional.

To be sure, texts dealing with Jews and health can be highly ambiguous as to the messages they convey. To take at the outset one of the major textual or narrative traditions explored in this book: when hundreds of writers celebrate Moses and his law code as the foundation of hygienic knowledge and practice, do they mean to suggest that Jews as a collective are indeed a healthy people? Or are they pointing up just the opposite, the degree to which Jews “today” (whenever that might be) have fallen away to a significant degree from their ancient health and purity? It is possible to find both of these judgments in the medical literature of the past two centuries. Yet overall, I argue that for most of those who participate in this interpretive tradition, Judaism and the Jews are indeed healthy. And since far more attention has been paid in the scholarly literature to the nexus of Jews and disease, this book will dwell almost completely on the alternative, positive image of the Jews and Judaism.

Anti-Semitic literature oftentimes represented modern Jewry as degenerate while allowing that ancient Hebrews, or even premodern Jews, were or at least could be healthy, as long as they followed their own laws and lived lives separate from their Christian neighbors. Degeneration of the Jewish body and soul occurred because of modernity, that is, emancipation and assimilation, and the freedoms from traditional observance that had characterized pre-emancipatory communal life. On the other hand, the equation, in anti-Jewish literature, of ancient and modern Jews was also quite common. In particular, racialized texts collapsed both time and space in the depiction of “Jews” as physically and spiritually distinct, and in one way or another inferior and corrupt.

However, this collapsing of time and space did not necessarily have to work to the disadvantage of Jews; that is, positive depictions of Jews and Judaism also relied on this technique. The healthy Hebrews of the past

could also be the healthy Jews of the present. Both Jewish and Christian medical writers who participated in the interpretive tradition of the healthy Jew sought, in the first place, to demonstrate the positive effects of ancient Jewish law on the Jews themselves; moreover, and at some level more significantly, these authorities suggested that these laws remain valid and practical, and not only for the Jews. A number of writers believed that the world would be a healthier place if all governments instituted – and all citizens followed – at least some of the hygienic practices laid out by Moses; and these authors explicitly urged their governments to undertake appropriate measures.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, medicine and race coalesced around nationalism to produce a coherent anti-Semitic ideology that cast the Jew as essentially different from and dangerous to civilization and culture. The medical images utilized by modern anti-Semitic writers are familiar: parasites, germs, plague, cancer, pathology, abnormality. Judaism and Jews were often, though certainly not universally, represented as pathological and pathogenic, as diseased and as the cause of disease. The diseases of the Jew and the diseased Jew were racialized over the course of the nineteenth century; the pathology and abnormality of the Jew was heritable and immutable.

The effort to represent Judaism and Jewry as healthy, as linked in multiple ways to the history of western medicine and science, was one clear and forceful response to a medicalized and racialized anti-Semitism. And, without doubt, this anti-Semitism and the response to it reached their apogee in Central Europe. However, it was not the case that the only extensive or systematic engagement of Jewish thinkers and writers with the issues of race and medicine occurred in Central Europe, as a response to German-speaking anti-Semitism. If we link causally the emergence of a discourse on Jews and health, or Jews and disease, with the political struggles over emancipation or civic rights – and the anti-Semitism that accompanied this – then we are bound to focus on the German-speaking countries of Central Europe, for it was there, as is well known, that this struggle was most protracted and uneven, and ultimately fraught. However, such a focus on the political or emancipatory drama cannot explain why a medicalized discourse about the Jews also emerged in such countries as Great Britain and the United States, and to a lesser extent France, in which the ‘path to emancipation’ was either notably different

(Great Britain and France) or nonexistent (the United States). Rather than focusing on the narrower political struggle over emancipation, I would argue that we need to understand the medicalization of the Jews and Judaism as linked to multiple intellectual, political, and cultural forces, and ultimately as part of an ongoing ordeal of civilization and civility, to borrow John Murray Cuddihy's felicitous phrase.¹³

Thus, I draw on scholarly and popular work produced in Europe, Great Britain, and the United States. This book is in part an attempt to demonstrate just how international, or transnational, the tradition of the healthy Jew and hygienic Judaism was; there was a vigorous borrowing and exchange of ideas across national and linguistic boundaries. It was not only Jews who produced this literature, nor was it produced for an exclusively Jewish audience. Much of it certainly was intended for Jewish readers. Surely this was so for the abundant popular medical literature written in Yiddish and published in Poland and the United States (and, to a lesser extent, Great Britain). These books, pamphlets, and articles were meant to educate the Jewish masses about all manner of things related to health and hygiene. The texts produced by Jews and non-Jews in English, German, and French were written with a different audience in mind, and with a different purpose. The articles published in general journals such as the *Lancet*, *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, *Hygienische Rundschau*, and *Soziale Hygiene* were intended for a religiously and ethnically heterogeneous audience.¹⁴ Once we go looking, we encounter in journals, books, and newspapers produced around the world a significant number of studies concerned with aspects of the Jewish body and mind, and infused with the same images, concepts and questions that impelled those in Central Europe. This engagement, moreover, was overdetermined. It was a result in part of anti-Semitism. But it also emerged because of dramatic developments in medicine and science, particularly in the realms of bacteriology and microbiology; intellectual and cultural tensions between the realms of religion and science; and the instability of the social status of doctors. The interpretive tradition of the healthy Jew was thus a product in part of anti-Semitism and apologia; but it also testifies to the truth that discourses emerge through an engagement with multiple forces, including the challenge of new discoveries and technologies, new ideas and methods, as well as developments in the political and social realms. In addition, the

discursive tradition of Moses and hygiene was built upon and directly engaged with older intellectual traditions that only indirectly or tangentially had anything to do with contemporary Judaism and Jewry.

The medical narratives produced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were linked intellectually with earlier narratives, even if later authors did not explicitly mention these earlier works. All these texts constitute a particular delimited discourse because they are working over and coming to terms with a common set of themes, ideas, and images. They share a language, even if written in many different languages, and a set of questions. What is the ultimate nature and purpose of the Mosaic laws? What is the relationship between these laws and the nature and condition of the Jews? What was the relationship between Moses and Egypt, between the Jews, Judaism, and Western civilization: Greece, Rome, Europe, America?

EGYPTIANS, GREEKS, AND JEWS/ARABS, CHRISTIANS, AND JEWS

The texts I deal with here are in one way or another counter-narratives, challenges to the dominant history of medicine (and, by extension, the dominant history of "civilization" defined in philhellenic terms), a history that began with the Greeks (with a nod to the ancient Egyptians) and culminated in the research laboratories and universities of Europe, Britain, and North America. If or when the Jews appeared in the dominant narratives, it was first and foremost as middlemen, as transmitters or "carriers" of medical texts and knowledge from one major civilization, the Arab, to another, the European. This notion of the Jews as "carriers" or mediators of medical knowledge echoed or perhaps derived from a more general and widespread notion of the Jews as carriers of civilization in general, and carriers of capitalism more particularly.¹⁵ As we shall see in Chapter 1, Jewish apologetics appropriated and advanced this notion of the Jews as transmitters of Eastern wisdom and science to the West; yet, at the same time this apologetic narrative reconfigured the story, adding an interpretive component that made the Jews not merely the transmitters but also the originators of medical knowledge.

One of the themes that threads through this book is the discursive relationship between Jews and civilization, and the way in which narratives about Jews and medicine address the larger notion of what J. Hoberman

has called the Jews' purported "imperfect adaptation to Western civilization."¹⁶ It is most explicit in the sort of apologetic literature I examine in the first chapter, the sizable group of texts that celebrated the "Jewish contribution to civilization." But it constitutes a recurrent theme throughout the book.

While Egypt, ancient Israel, Greece, and Rome surely stand for themselves in these narratives, at some level they also serve as codes for other constructed or imagined entities. Greece, and to a lesser extent Rome, stand for the West as originators and bearers over the centuries of all that is defined as wise, healthy, civilized, cultured.¹⁷ Central and Western Europe, and then the United States, are the natural inheritors and guarantors of this wisdom and civilization. What was at stake, even if only at the level of discourse and imagination, in being a people or group defined as civilized, of being credited with having contributed to the course of civilization and progress in the West (which, in the period we are discussing, was of course the only place that Civilization and Progress could and would occur)? Sven Lindquist, in his work on colonialism and genocide, has argued that at the heart of the European relationship with non-European "primitive" peoples (what German writers called *Naturvölker*) was the notion that nature and history determined whether individual nations or peoples survived, or were enslaved, or exterminated.¹⁸ It is hard to argue with him; the course of the twentieth century, including the fate of the Jews of Europe, bears this out.

What better way, then, to demonstrate the civilized and cultured status of the Jews than to make the Jews the saviors of this civilization, a salvation effected through the invention and transmission of the principles of health and hygiene. In this way, "civilization" for the Jews is an act of recovery; the Jews are not, like *Naturvölker*, in an original state of barbarity, deprived of civilization until they acquire it through contact with the civilized nations of Europe. Rather, the Jews are the very source of civilization. It is civilization itself that has, willfully or not, forgotten this.¹⁹ And thus, the task of the texts on Judaism and hygiene was to remind an only recently civilized Europe and America that the Jews had been healthy and civilized since long ago, and that the West owed more to the Jews in this regard than mainstream scholarship seemed willing to acknowledge.